

Wildlife Diversity News

A Publication of the Iowa DNR Wildlife Diversity Program

2015 Peregrine Falcon Update

Peregrine Falcons have nested at the State Capitol Building in Des Moines since 2003, and on March 15, 2015 a pair was once again seen flying nearby. Although falcons have been present at the Capitol since 2003, each year has had its ups and downs.

In October 2003 a female falcon, 39E, banded at an NSP Riverside smokestack nest box near Minneapolis, established a presence on the east side of our State Capitol. At that time a remodeling project was underway and Neumann Brothers Construction Foreman, Curt Small, said he enjoyed seeing the falcon strafe and take pigeons throughout the winter. It was believed the male, 93T, from the downtown nest at the American Enterprise Building had attracted this female to the Capitol. Peregrine means wanderer in Latin, and most falcons live up to that name until a nesting territory is secured. Usually this takes two to four years. However, female 39E remained on site. The young female essentially fledged from its Minneapolis site, relocated to Des Moines, and ceased wandering.

In 2008, an unbanded male paired with 39E on a nest ledge in northeast corner of the building.



Photo: Greg Septon

Neumann Brothers Construction was instrumental in modifying the ledge to allow falcon nesting, and two young were produced. In 2009, female 39E shifted to the American Enterprise Building. Relocations such as this are not the norm for falcons, but it does occur on rare occasions. Meanwhile an unbanded female and unbanded male occupied the Capitol territory. In 2010, another replacement occurred at the Capitol. A 2008 male, 39A, from American Enterprise parented one young with the unbanded female. By 2012, 11 young had been produced at the Capitol.

However, during 2013 nesting cycle, male 39A was rescued on the ground with a talon injury. Wildlife Rehabilitator, Kay Neumann, provided immediate care but the bird's condition was compromised, and unfortunately, it died. However, the unbanded female was successful at feeding her brood and all three young fledged. Spring 2014 was brightened when a replacement male was identified at the Capitol. On March 12, 2014 a pair of falcons was seen flying over the Capitol. They produced three young last year. Volunteer Wildlife Monitor, Bob Hoehle, is vigilant in his stewardship at this site. This pair will hopefully be successful in this year's nesting attempt.

A Falcon River Trip is planned for May 1-2 once again at Harper's Ferry in Northeast Iowa.

- Pat Schlarbaum,
WDP Technician

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*Edited by
Emily Kiefer*

Diversity Dispatch

Breaking News in the Wide World of Wildlife

Wood Bison Being Re-introduced in Alaska

Wood Bison were once found throughout the boreal forests of Alaska and Northwestern Canada. Since then, their populations have nearly been wiped out. After a successful recovery effort in Canada, the Alaska Fish and Game Department will be attempting a similar effort. The plan is to release over 150 Wood Bison between late March and May between the Innoko and Yukon Rivers.

For the full story, [click here](#).



Photo: Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game



Photo: Lowell Washburn

Birds May be Able to Detect Incoming Tornadoes

In 2014 Henry Streby with the University of California, Berkley along with his fellow researchers were tracking the yearly movements of Golden-winged Warblers between their wintering grounds in Columbia and their breeding grounds in Tennessee when they noticed some interesting activity. During April 2014 the five Golden-winged Warblers fitted with geolocators returned to their breeding grounds in Tennessee only to leave the area only about a week later as a major severe weather outbreak moved into the area.

[Click here](#) to read the full story.

News From the Frog Pond

We had many, many wonderful applications for our small grants programs this year. Small Research and Education Grants were awarded this year for the following projects:

1. Boone County Conservation Board- Educational Bird Blind with Viewing/Feeding Area at Grant's Woods Park
2. Iowa State University – Environmental DNR – A New Tool for Population Monitoring
3. Iowa State University – Midwest Mustelid Trends
4. Iowa State University – Urban Habitat Use by Butterflies
5. Sac County Conservation Board – Educational Biofact Project
6. Waldorf College – Use of Restored Wetlands on an Agricultural Landscape by Eastern Tiger Salamanders Part II

The Small Management Grants to our partner organizations are:



1. Des Moines County Conservation Board – Big Hollow Forest Management, Phase II
 2. Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation – Western Iowa Restoration
 3. Story County Conservation Board – Dakins Lake Prairie Restoration Project
- Congratulations to the recipients and thank you to all of the other organizations that applied to our program.

- Karen Kinkead,
WDP Coordinator

Waterman Prairie Bird Conservation Area: A Birding Hotspot

On March 7, 2015 a 68,614 acre area encompassing Waterman Prairie Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and a portion of the Little Sioux River watershed in O'Brien, Clay, Buena Vista, and Cherokee counties was dedicated as Iowa's 20th official Bird Conservation Area (BCA). The event was held in conjunction with the annual Bald Eagle Watch at the O'Brien County Prairie Heritage Center, where a record-setting 83 people attended the dedication ceremony.

The uniqueness of this Bird Conservation Area is related in large part to the fact that it is centered in the rolling hill topography associated with Waterman Creek and the Little Sioux River, which is covered by a sprawling mix of native prairies and Bur Oak Savannas. About 5,000 acres of permanently protected land lies within areas such as Buena Vista County Conservation Park, the Bertram Reservation, Tuttle WMA, and Wittrock Indian Village State Preserve (a National Historic Landmark). American Indians hunted Bison, Elk, Prairie Chickens and Sharp-tailed Grouse in these valleys for hundreds, if not thousands, of years before Euro-American settlers arrived.

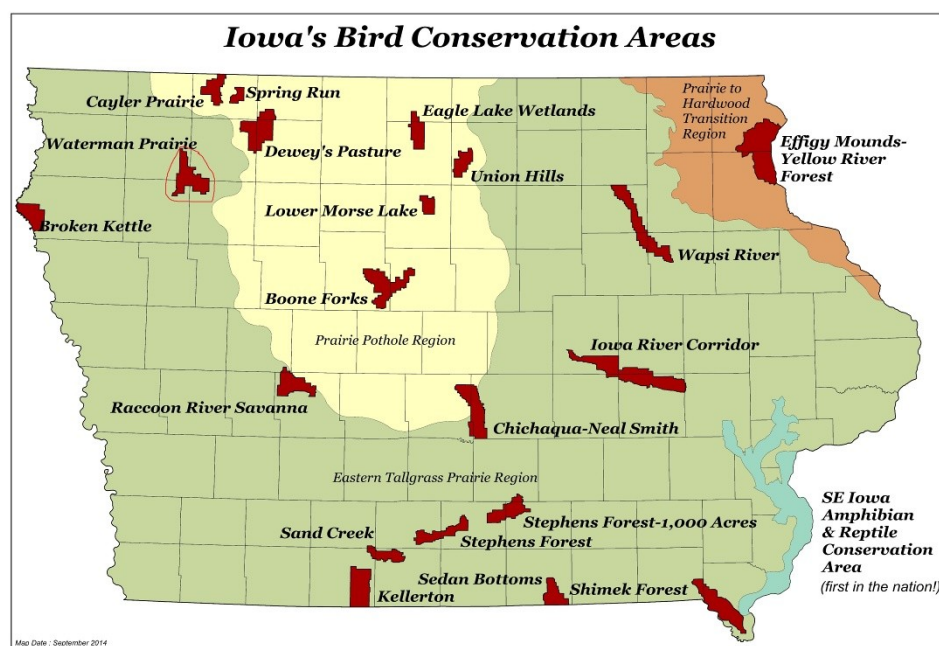
No other BCA in northwestern Iowa has as many

bird species documented as Waterman Prairie. To date, 253 species of birds have been identified in this BCA, with at least 108 of those species nesting. Of particular importance is the fact that 66 of Iowa's 85 Birds of Greatest Conservation Need can be found inhabiting this unique landscape of prairie, savanna, and riparian habitats.

The Waterman Prairie area was primarily selected as a Bird Conservation Area because of its importance to grassland birds, the fastest declining bird group in this country. It also was selected because the area contains Oak Savanna, a Midwest ecosystem as endangered as Tallgrass Prairie. Grassland covers nearly one-third of the landscape within this BCA, and Oak Savanna comprises about one-sixth. Row crop land makes up most of the rest of the area. Declining nesting grassland birds, such as Bobolink, Eastern and Western Meadowlarks, Field Sparrow, Upland Sandpiper, Northern Harrier, and Henslow's Sparrow, all will benefit from the establishment of this new BCA. Savanna birds, especially Red-headed Woodpecker, Baltimore and Orchard orioles, and Eastern Bluebirds will increase in numbers, and perhaps Iowa's Endangered Barn Owl and the rare

Swainson's Hawk will nest here, as well. This BCA also is designated an Audubon Important Bird Area (IBA). The National Audubon Society's Important Bird Area Program is a global effort to identify and conserve areas that are vital to birds and other biodiversity, and Waterman Prairie certainly qualifies as vital habitat to many declining bird species.

-Continued on page 4



Waterman Prairie Bird Conservation Area: A Birding Hotspot, continued

Waterman Prairie BCA exists only because of the partnerships developed among conservation agencies, private conservation organizations, and active public citizens. The Nature Conservancy played a key role in nominating this area to become a BCA, and other major partners include Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, Natural Resources Conservation Service, O'Brien, Cherokee, Clay, and Buena Vista County Conservation Boards, Iowa Audubon, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Prairie Lakes Audubon Bird Club, Pheasants Forever, and Iowa DNR.

Future plans for this BCA include assisting landowners to better manage for birds and creating a

map that shows where particular bird species might be seen. Julia Dale, AmeriCorps Wildlife Diversity Research Assistant, created a brochure for this BCA, which includes a bird list and is available from this office. To learn more about Iowa DNR's Bird Conservation Area program, go to:

<http://www.iowadnr.gov/Environment/WildlifeStewardship/NonGameWildlife/Conservation/BirdConservationAreas.aspx>

- Bruce Ehresman
WDP Biologist



A Big Thank-You From the
Wildlife Diversity Program to
those of you who donated to the
Chickadee Check-off on your 2014
tax form!



Ghosts of the Cedar River Valley: Wood Turtle Research in Iowa

Turtle population declines worldwide have been well documented in recent years, especially species inhabiting eastern and central North American rivers and streams. Declines are generally attributed to habitat loss or alteration, habitat fragmentation, nest predation, and road mortality.

One riverine species that has been affected by human activities is the wood turtle (*Glyptemys insculpta*). Wood turtles are a medium-sized (14–20 cm) semi-aquatic turtle found in most New England states, north into Canada, south to Virginia, and in four Midwestern states; Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa. Overall, the distribution is often locally disjunct with many populations being fairly small and isolated, where suitable habitat remains. Wood turtles are named for the appearance and feel of the carapace (top of shell), but that name also may be derived from the habitat they are found: within a few hundred meters of clear, sandy, shallow streams and rivers surrounded by woodlands and grasslands. Due to population declines and habitat loss, this species is legally protected to various degrees in the United States and Canada.

The Iowa wood turtle population is both genetically and geographically distinct from other Midwestern populations. They occur only in a few scattered populations along the Cedar River watershed



Wood Turtle with a radio transmitter attached to its shell. Photo by Jeff Tamplin

in suitable habitat located near rivers and streams. These “ghost” populations consist mostly of older adults that may experience low mortality but also exhibit little or no annual recruitment. Due to their rarity and limited range, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) lists the wood turtle as a state endangered species.

In Spring 2014, the wood turtle research group at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) was awarded a state wildlife grant (“Upper Midwest Riverine Turtle Habitat Improvement”) through the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to monitor Iowa wood turtle behavior at two sites, one in Black Hawk County and one in Butler County. Monitoring is conducted in conjunction with land restoration work being performed by the state DNR and the Black Hawk and Butler County Conservation Boards.

Surveys are completed at both sites to gain baseline data. A mark/recapture study is used to determine population demographics at both sites. Radio telemetry is used to track individuals in order to delineate home range size, determine movement patterns, habitat preferences, nesting sites, foraging habitat, and hibernation locations of adult and juvenile wood turtles.

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Typical Wood Turtle nesting habitat along the Cedar River. Photo by Jeff Tamplin

Ghosts of the Cedar River Valley: Wood Turtle Research in Iowa, continued

Microhabitat details are recorded at each turtle location to reveal how turtle body temperature relates to environmental temperatures and levels of sunlight exposure. Among other data, distance to permanent water, and several other river/stream characteristics preferred by wood turtles are recorded. In addition, previous studies completed in Butler County from 2003 to 2009, and Black Hawk County from 2009 to 2013 will be compiled with current findings to assist in management recommendations.

These baseline findings will be used to improve turtle habitat in the river/stream corridors through the creation of canopy openings, prairie plantings, and improved nest sites. Approximately 38 acres of lowland savanna, high quality prairie and soft shrub edge habitat will be created on public lands, and an additional 40 acres of improvements will be made on private lands. The effectiveness of these habitat management practices will be assessed through continued monitoring; specifically targeting turtle use, species abundance, nest success, and habitat response at these two sites.

Currently, 42 turtles (20 females, 19 males, and 3 juveniles) are actively being tracked via radio telemetry: 22 individuals (9 females, 12 males, and 1 juvenile) in Black Hawk County, and 20 individuals (11 females, 7 males, and 2 juveniles) in Butler County. In addition, another 76 turtles (18 in Black Hawk, 58 in Butler) have been captured, marked, and released since 2003 when studies began. Field site visits occur 2 to 4 days per week, depending on weather conditions and the locations and movement patterns of individual turtles. All turtles are located at least once per week, when possible.

Data from the 2014 field season is being analyzed, but preliminary findings show that during the active season, Butler County turtles average farther distances from permanent water (47.8 m, $n=274$) than Black Hawk County turtles (30.0 m, $n=238$), potentially due to limited habitat availability at the Black Hawk County site

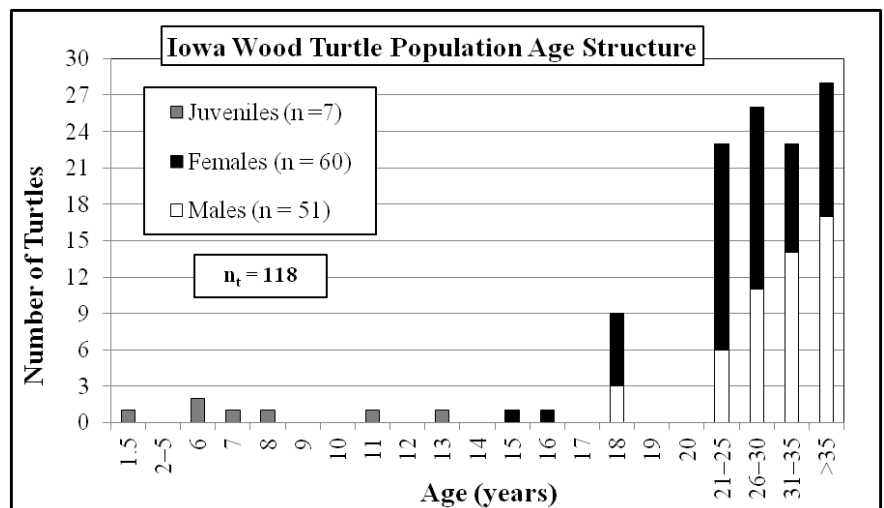
due to human development. On average Butler County females were found to be about 62.8 m from permanent water, while Black Hawk County females averaged about 40.8 m from permanent water. Three adult female turtles in Butler County were found more than 200 m from water, with the farthest being an individual traveling approximately 350 m into an agricultural field. The maximum distance from water that was observed by an adult female in Black Hawk County was 200 m. Two additional Black Hawk County females were observed approximately 155 m from water.

Male wood turtles may remain closer to water than females and this is evident at both study sites (18.4 m, in Black Hawk County, 15.56 m in Butler County). In Butler County, the farthest distance from water observed in a male turtle was approximately 75 m, while in Black Hawk County; two male turtles were observed nearly 135 m from water.

Habitat restoration is anticipated to begin in winter 2014 and early 2015. Monitoring surveys will continue through the summer of 2015, with additional properties likely to be surveyed when turtles emerge from hibernation.

- Josh Otten

*Environmental Scientist, Stantec
Graduate Research Assistant, UNI*



Northern Long-eared Bat Listed Under ESA

The Northern Long-Eared Bat (*Myotis septentrionalis*) has been listed under the Federal Endangered Species Act. The determination is “Threatened with an Interim 4(d) rule.” This is a species whose populations have been decimated due to White-nose Syndrome, a fungal disease that is spreading through the United States from east to west. In the eastern US, this species has declined to the point that additional losses due to habitat loss could lead to the extinction of the species. However, without habitat management to maintain the habitats, the species could also become extinct – therefore the exemptions listed in the Interim

4(d) rule are being proposed. The US Fish and Wildlife Service will be accepting comments on the interim 4(d) rule before those become final (the Threatened Status is final). We will have more information in a future edition of our Newsletter, but for the most current information, please visit the USFWS website at:

<http://www.fws.gov/Midwest/endangered/mammals/nlba/index.html>

- Karen Kinkead,
WDP Coordinator

Species Spotlight- Blue Jay

While I cannot say that I have a favorite bird, I do hold some birds in higher esteem than others. One group of birds that I particularly value and enjoy is the Corvid family – which includes crows, ravens, jays, magpies, and nutcrackers. Of these, I have always had a particular fondness for the Blue Jay. As a child, one of my earliest memories is of this bird of blue. I remember hearing its loud and raucous “Jay! Jay!” call - long before I saw it. When I finally did see the bird, it was perched on a horizontal branch of a white oak tree – right above my head, and it appeared to be scolding me for entering its space. I remember thinking “what a bold bird this is – to challenge a human.” Then I noticed how beautiful a bird it is – how striking its colors.

Alexander Wilson, father of American ornithology, accurately described the Blue Jay to be “distinguished as a kind of beau among feathered tenants of our woods, by the brilliancy of his dress; and like most other coxcombs, makes himself still more conspicuous by his loquacity, and the oddness of his tones and gestures.”

In Iowa, the Blue Jay is a common dweller of oak savannas and woodlands, both rural and urban. It is quite fond of bird feeders, and it usually is more abundant near forest edges than in deep forest, where it makes good use of shrubs and thorny thickets. Most of its diet is composed of acorns, nuts, and seeds—although it also eats small creatures such as

caterpillars, grasshoppers, and beetles. It often eats grains and sometimes raids other birds’ nests for eggs and nestlings, although it is primarily a vegetarian bird. The Blue Jay tends to hold food items in its feet while pecking them open, and it stores food in caches to eat later.

The Blue Jay is known in the Midwest as a valuable planter of oak woodlands, since it often stores acorns in the ground and then fails to retrieve them. This jay carries food in its throat and upper esophagus—its “gular pouch,” and the bird can transport up to 5 acorns at a time, storing the acorns for future meals. One study documented six Blue Jays each caching 3,000-5,000 acorns during one fall.

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Photo: Jim Durbin

Species Spotlight- Blue Jay, continued

This skulker of the woods is well known for being both intelligent and highly adaptable – both important survival traits. Another characteristic that I particularly enjoy about this bird is its amazing vocabulary of sounds – especially its ability to imitate other birds and animals. For instance, it is a great mimic of both the Red-tailed Hawk and the Red-shouldered Hawk.

Many a time have I heard the cry of a hawk, only to discover that the source of the sound is emanating from the beak of a large bluish songbird – hiding in a nearby bush or tree - and not from a hawk at all. Whenever that happens, it almost seems that the Blue Jay delights in my embarrassment – as it often cocks its head and gives me the “hairy eyeball” look when I discover that I have been duped – again! Blue Jays have been noted to mimic hawks when approaching a bird feeder, apparently deceiving other birds into scattering. This allows the Blue Jay to take over the feeder, at least temporarily. While this jay is quite good at imitating the “meow” of a cat, our neighborhood Blue Jays typically emit raucous calls whenever a tabby is nearby, alerting other birds to be aware of a predator on the prowl.

The Blue Jay is acknowledged for maintaining a tight family bond and a complex social system; usually observed in pairs, family groups, or small flocks. It often mates for life and remains with its mate throughout the year. This species often nests near human dwellings, and nests are typically placed 10-25 feet above the ground in the crotch or thick outer branches of a deciduous or coniferous tree. The bulky

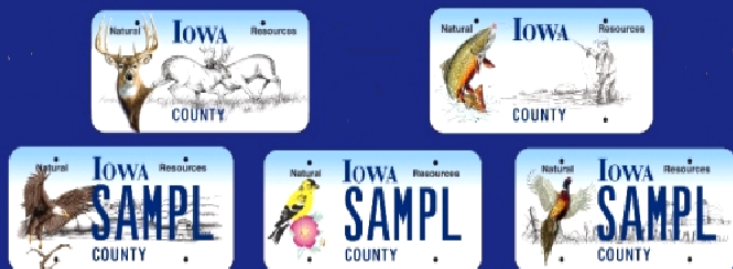
nest is comprised of thorny twigs, bark, mosses, grasses, and leaves and is lined with rootlets. The female typically lays 4 or 5 olive-colored eggs, with dark spots. About five weeks after incubation begins, the rowdy youngsters start to fledge. The family group will remain together, feeding and traveling, until fall – when juveniles move out on their own.

Blue Jays are year-round residents of Iowa, although large migrations of these birds occur in both spring and fall. In Iowa, we can expect to see groups of Blue Jays arriving in April, and flocks traveling through can also be seen in September and October. Large flocks of up to 250 birds may travel together. During my annual trip to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in September, I typically observe a somewhat steady stream of Blue Jays, flying overhead in a southerly direction. Some birds spend the night at the fringes of the camp, before moving on the next day.

While some people don't like Blue Jays, referring to them as audacious bullies and murderers, I tend to hold an opposite, more friendly view of them. I suggest that if you take the time to observe them closely, you will discover they are intelligent, curious, and beautiful family-oriented birds, as well as highly entertaining. Because of their nature, it is probably fair to assume that Blue Jays find many of us humans to be quite entertaining, too!

- Bruce Ehresman
WDP Biologist

SUPPORT CONSERVATION IN IOWA.



BUY A NATURAL RESOURCE PLATE.

22% of the original purchase price and 60% of the renewal fee for natural resource license plates go directly to the Wildlife Diversity Program.

Reminder to Those Who Feed Birds

If you are one to visit the website of Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology at Ithaca, New York, you will see that it is suggested to people who feed birds to “keep those feeders clean.” Unsanitary conditions at bird feeders can lead to the spread of several diseases amongst birds that frequent these feeders.

Each year in Iowa, especially during late winter, our office receives reports of sick or dead birds at feeder locations, particularly in the southern part of the state. Aspergillosis, a disease caused by a fungus which often grows in contaminated feed or litter, is one of the main causes of sick and/or dying birds at feeders. During midwinter warm-ups, like those experienced this year, fungus quickly grows. Birds feeding on contaminated grain often become sick and die. Salmonellosis is another disease that is contracted at feeders. This disease is caused by the *Salmonella* bacteria. It is transmitted mostly by contamination of bird droppings, frequently those found in the birds’ feed or water. It can also spread when one bird comes into direct contact with another. Birds suffering from this disease can appear weak, listless, and fluffed-up, and they might suffer convulsions before they die.

Some of the finches that appear to be sick have “house finch disease” or conjunctivitis, a disease which causes swelling of the eye tissue but is not always fatal. While this disease was much more prevalent about twenty years ago than it is now, it still

shows up in finches at feeders from time to time. This disease particularly affects the respiratory system and is caused by the bacterium, *Mycoplasma gallisepticum*, which poses no threat to humans. As the name suggests, the disease mostly affects House Finches, but there have been a few documented cases of the disease in American Goldfinch, as well. Since birds concentrate at bird feeders, the risk of disease spread can especially increase during times when large numbers of this species are sharing the same feeding sites. Adding extra feeders to your yard can slow down spread of this disease by eliminating overcrowding.

The good news about all three of these diseases is that they are largely preventable. Practicing good hygiene at feeder stations is the key. Clean bird feeders and waterers with a 10 percent bleach solution about once each month. Make sure the feeder is dry before refilling it with seed. Of equal importance to disinfecting the feeder is cleaning up spilled seed and bird droppings below feeders. Be sure to wear rubber gloves while cleaning the feeders, since humans can contract some diseases, such as those caused by some *Salmonella* bacteria, from affected feeders or sick birds.

Our thanks to those of you who report your sick birds to us. The information that you provide helps us learn more about what diseases are infecting Iowa birds, how widespread the disease might be, and which bird species are most affected by a particular disease. We in turn will try to keep you informed of ways to prevent the spread of disease amongst the large variety of bird species that so many people enjoy watching.

- Bruce Ehresman
WDP Biologist



Photo: Doug Harr

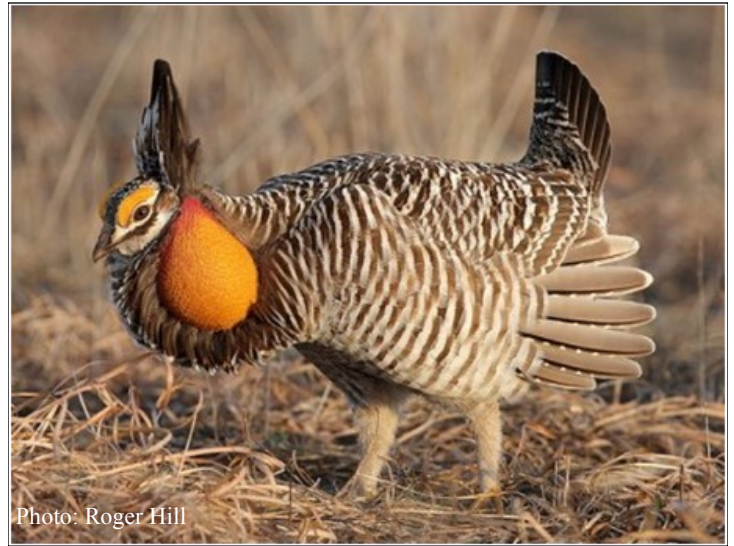
The Prairie Chicken Story

The overcast night sky was blanketed with “black velvet at half past dark.” Sunrise stirrings to brighten the horizon were an hour or so away. Through squinting eyes, faint flickerings like candlelight were seen dancing through the darkness. White on the rumps of birds were highlighting the lay of the land. A low resonance as a “bloom bloom” of antiquity seemed to emanate from the earth. Cackling cackles interlaced with whoops and staccato laughter triggered a revelry of sound - only to be grounded again with the familiar bloom bloom....bloom bloom. Male prairie chickens initiate a most vibrant and early start to their day!

Spirited competitors flew in and joined dancers spinning and leaping over one another. Pinnae feathers at the base of their skulls sprang erect as if tuning into celestial radio waves. Reddish orange sacs on their necks inflated passionately with each stanza of bloom bloom. Some were stamping their feet with the tempo of Spanish calypso dancers. (Maybe their dynamic duple moves were inspired by prairie chickens of Old Mexico.) All the while, combatants were competing for their patch of prairie as if choreographed by pro wrasslers - all for show. One thing was crystalline clear: prairie chickens were ‘ki high and cacklin’ in dawn’s early light!

Greater Prairie Chickens were the most abundant gamebird on Iowa prairies during European settlement. Numbers peaked when most of Iowa was a mosaic of small grain fields, hayfields, pasture and native prairie. Then dramatic population declines began to occur. Hundreds of thousands were packed in ice and sent by train to eastern markets year after year. In 1878 the Iowa Legislature passed a law that limited the daily possession of prairie chickens to 25 birds per person. This is believed to be the first time in American history that possession limits were used as a tool to regulate the harvest of game. The last open season for prairie chickens was held in 1915, according to Bruce Ehresman, DNR Wildlife Diversity biologist.

Although increasingly rare, nesting prairie chickens were included with Iowa’s native birds into the 1950s. The last were noted in Appanoose County in 1952. Prairie chickens were unable to adapt to



Iowa’s changing agricultural system of the twentieth century. More and more of Iowa’s grasslands were laid low by the plow, until our prairie chicken population was extirpated or wiped out.

Beginning in 1987 Iowa benefitted from prairie chicken rejuvenation efforts from those that came before: Alan Taylor, Harvey Ploeger, Ed White, Bob Moore, and Melvin Moe at the Grand River Wildlife Management Unit are five key members that have retired with distinction. These men developed a plan to include prairie chickens on the southern Iowa landscape. It was quite a vision then, and essentially realizing a dream come true today.

Over the years the Conservation Reserve Program created grasslands on previous row crop areas that benefitted grassland birds. Upwards of 550 prairie chickens were trapped in Kansas and released into Iowa from 1987-1994. Chickens were released at the Ringgold Area south of Mount Ayr and on private ground SE of town. The chickens prospered for a number of years. Many prairie chickens turned up in northern Missouri at a location called the Dunn Ranch. And in Iowa chickens began to occupy a beautiful ridge southwest of Kellerton, Iowa in Ringgold County. Male chickens look for high ground to improve range of their booming calls. These areas are called booming grounds or “leks” where they call and dance for their potential mates. It’s all about the lay of the land where prairie chicken leks are located.

According to Breeding Bird Surveys, nesting

The Prairie Chicken Story, continued

grasslands birds began experiencing a most dramatic decline compared to wetland or forest nesting birds. Soon our prairie chickens became a keystone species: if habitat is sufficient for prairie chickens other grassland birds like bobolinks, upland sand pipers and Henslow's Sparrows will also benefit. Prairie chicken habitat helps mammals like badgers, also.

The Nature Conservancy bought the Dunn Ranch for grassland conservation, and Iowa DNR spearheaded an area called Kellerton Grasslands Bird Conservation Area. The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation and Pheasants Forever have stood shoulder to shoulder with the purchase of nearly every parcel. The Dunn Ranch is over 3,000 acres in northern Missouri and Kellerton is approaching 2,000 acres. The prairie chickens' grassland habitat base has grown into the Grand River Wildlife Management Unit staffed by Chad Paup, Josh Rusk, Heath Van Waus, and Andy Kellner, and private lands staff Brian Hickman, Helga Offenburger, and Matt Dollison with Nishnabotna Unit. John Strain with Missouri River Unit provided a wealth of experience at trapping chickens. John worked in Kansas in the '90s and Nebraska in recent efforts. These professionals create habitat and work along-side local farmers improving habitat for all wildlife. In 2000 the Kellerton Grasslands Bird Conservation Area (BCA) became the first grassland BCA in the nation consisting of 2000 acres of public lands with the associated 10,000 acres in private lands supplementing with pasture and prairie plantings.

By 2005, surveys indicated a dwindling prairie chicken presence throughout southern Iowa and northern Missouri. Numerous years of unfavorable spring weather adversely affected nesting and survival of all grassland birds. In conjunction genetic work on our existing chicken population indicated "bottle neck" complications. Introducing new genetics into the existing population was critical to sustain our chicken population. Wildlife Diversity Biologist Stephanie Shepherd created a far-reaching Greater Prairie Chicken Plan to improve their numbers into the 21st century in Iowa. Nebraska DNR was approached to provide prairie chickens to infuse new genetics into our flock. Challenges included funding for housing

staff in Nebraska for scouting, trapping and relocating prairie chickens to Iowa.

Our partners at the Blank Park Zoo in Des Moines provided a secure funding source. According to Kevin Drees, their "Coins for Conservation" program was a perfect fit. Twenty-five cents of each admission could be designated to a specific conservation project. Prairie chickens to southern Iowa became a worthy choice to young and old visiting the Zoo.

With funding secured, a goal of trapping and releasing 350 prairie chickens over a four year period was proposed by the Iowa DNR Wildlife Bureau. Beginning in 2012, prairie chickens in far SW Nebraska near Imperial were relocated to Iowa. This year's efforts conclude with bringing Burwell, Nebraska's prairie chickens to southern Iowa.

Males have an interesting biology that contributes a lot of fanfare to any grassland's high ground. The lay of the land determines where booming grounds or leks are located on the landscape. Air sacs on the sides of the birds' necks are inflated which emit a low-resonating boom. Two pinnae feathers atop their heads stand erect. All the while the male is strutting and leaping with an amazing array of cackles and whoops – it is really quite a demonstrative and elaborate dance. And it is all for the benefit of impressing a potential mate.

For thousands of years the native community of the Yankton Nation has honored these birds. We have an understanding of the importance for buffalo that sustained Native Americans. They also have particular reverence for bald eagles, as the first bird to fly above the earth. Similarly prairie chickens are also honored. Legend tells of a man who killed a prairie chicken to feed his family. That night in his dreams the chicken spoke to him saying it was not prepared to die. It directed the man to perform their dance whenever dancers congregated. The prairie chicken dance is sacred to the Yankton Nation. It has only been since 2005 that this dance has been shared outside their social circles.

Ringgold CCB Director Kate Zimmerman welcomed Chief Bluestar Eagle, Sherwyn Zephier, and his wife Walks With New Beginnings, Estellene, from Greenwood, SD to Iowa. They were asked to

The Prairie Chicken Story, continued



Members of the Yankton Tribe performing the prairie chicken dance.

assist with the completion of the prairie chickens' relocation. The Perry Little family from Marti, SD performed the sacred prairie chicken dance. They were accompanied by the Waxing Moon Drum led by Medicine Eagle, Bob Barnhill. Native elders contributed their voices to the songs. There were a total of three performances at Channel 23 Great Day, Mount Ayr High School, and at the Blank Park Zoo. Funding for the dancers and presenters was provided by **Resource Enhancement And Protection, Conservation Education Grant.**

It was a particularly noteworthy presentation at the Mount Ayr School. At the completion of the dance and drum performance, students stayed in their seats in a very respectful manner. There was only one question, "How do you learn the songs?"

The Kellerton wildlife viewing platform was staffed with professionals on Saturday morning of the festival. Over 200 enthusiasts turned out before dawn to stake out their viewing opportunities. Some interested students brought their parents to view prairie chickens in the wild. A record number of chickens were in attendance also. In dawn's early light upwards of 44 prairie chickens were active on their booming grounds. Some of the males have been active at this site since February. The first weekend of April is designated the Prairie Chicken Festival date as this

is the time of spring that the females are attracted to the goings-on at the lek. Females will initiate nesting in mid-April.

At noon in the Blank Park Zoo all the partners were recognized. Respectively those partners include: Blank Park Zoo, The Nature Conservancy, the Missouri and Nebraska DNRs, and Iowa State University. The Yankton Nation was premiered by the Chief. The amazing prairie chicken dance was shared by the Perry Little family. A beautiful spring day included a wonderful presentation of a native culture that has persevered the test of time. Their culture, customs, prayers, and songs still exist. Participants were encouraged to join in a snake dance of renewal that provided many uplifting moments. Participants received exercise that manifested in learning another important perspective of the Yankton Nation, that of renewal.

Prairie chickens are back on the landscape in Iowa. It is hoped future generations will appreciate efforts that have contributed to keeping prairie chickens with us. It's hoped the Blank Park Zoo's "Coins for Conservation" program can benefit other species to the extent that prairie chickens have prospered from their funding. In 2015 prairie chickens have provided a stimulus that united our Wildlife Bureau staff in a common cause bringing chickens to Iowa. Prairie chickens have motivated habitat creation that has united a group of grassland nesting birds. And they have united a native culture with ours with the goal of improving grassland habitat for generations to come. Let's "keep dancers on the prairie."

- Pat Schlarbaum,
WDP Technician



Last Look



These pictures of Peregrine Falcons were taken at their nest site on the State Capitol Building. If you look closely, you can see the reflection of the juvenile falcon in the top picture and the reflection of the adult in the bottom picture.

Upcoming Events

Falcon River Trip

Harper's Ferry Community Center and Nobles Island; May 1-2

For more information call: 712-330-0526 or email: pat.schlarbaum@dnr.iowa.gov

Native Iowa Plant Sale

Blank Park Zoo; May 16-17

[Click here](#) to check out the Zoo's event page

Landscaping for Wildlife Presentation

Bass Pro Shops, Altoona, IA; May 16

Iowa Prairie Conference

UNI Tallgrass Prairie Center, Cedar Falls, IA; July 16-18

For more information, [click here](#), to visit the Tallgrass Prairie Center's website.

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Iowa Department of Natural Resources
1436 255th Street
Boone, IA 50036
Phone: (515) 432-2823
Fax: (515) 432-2835
E-mail: Karen.Kinhead@dnr.iowa.gov



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